

## Employee Spotlight: Janice Lovato

March 10, 2015



### A gift for imagination

While the Associate Directorate for Nuclear and High Hazard Operations' Janice Lovato was still working as a cashier at Smith's Food and Drug Center in Los Alamos over a decade ago, a regular, usually friendly customer came through her line one day, but this time in an obviously disgruntled mood. As the shopper slowly placed his purchases on the cash register counter, he looked at Lovato in exasperation and told her that standing at the cash register was where she was going to be for the rest of her life unless she made a change.

"That was in April 2003," Lovato explains. "I was grateful for the job, and I enjoyed my brief chats with customers and other aspects of the work, but I was a single mom with two young sons and many unfulfilled hopes and dreams. What the man said hit a nerve. My self-esteem already was quite low, and I felt exhausted and drained after struggling to make ends meet during the six years since my divorce. Everything I had been through had taken a toll on me."

A year later Lovato joined the Laboratory and today is a happily remarried mother of six, including two daughters from her second husband's previous marriage. In addition to working full-time, Lovato also has earned a bachelor's degree, is about to enroll in a distance-learning master's program and has turned her love for nature-watching and story-telling into writing a children's book called *Germaine the Beetle*.

"I am always telling stories," Lovato says, "whether at bedtime, in the car going somewhere or sitting under a tree in the park. One night some years ago I was home alone with three of the children—Beranda was 13, Amber nine and Ricky eight—when the power suddenly went out during a major storm. It was pitch-dark, and the thunder sounded like it was cracking the sky in half. I found a candle and told a story to distract the kids. By the time the lights and television set came back on, Amber walked over to the TV and to my surprise turned it off. All three children asked for another tale."

## **Finding stories in the day-to-day**

The road to *Germaine the Beetle* has not been easy for Lovato, and she knows that it's just a beginning. "My mom was a housewife, and my dad was the one working outside the home," Lovato recalls. "When I married right out of high school I thought that was how it was going to be, but I learned the hard way that I need to rely on myself and accomplish things on my own."

The first time Lovato sat down to write was in 1997 when she was 23. It rained hard as she left work at Smith's that evening, and she was sad because it was the first time since the divorce that her only child at that point, five-year-old Ricky, was going to spend the night with his father. She sat down at the kitchen table, noticed a notebook and pen nearby and started to create a story.

"It was like I was right back to being a child using my imagination," Lovato says. "I loved sitting in the cherry tree in our side yard when I was young, collecting lady bugs and making up adventures at the same time."

Lovato and young audience during a reading event on the New Mexico Rail Runner Express.

Lovato finds adventures everywhere she looks. One day at work, for example, a co-worker saw a spider and screamed. Lovato knew that her colleague probably would kill the creature, so she quickly rushed over with a sheet of paper and took the spider outside. When her friend asked Lovato why she had bothered to rescue such an ugly and scary animal, Lovato looked at her sadly and told her that the spider might have been looking for food for its babies. On the way home, Lovato thought up additional spider stories and wrote them down after her children had gone to bed.

*Germaine* did not materialize until 2010 and initially was supposed to be a snake. The manuscript was published in 2014, with the cover art contributed by a professional artist and the interior illustrations drawn by Lovato's then 12-year-old son Justin.

"Justin has loved to draw since he was three," Lovato notes with pride. "I remember how much especially my grandmother encouraged my imagination, and it feels wonderful to do the same for my kids and the other children reading *Germaine*."

Lovato works for the Associate Directorate for Nuclear and High Hazard Operations' TA-55 Training group.

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